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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, August 8, 1934.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "Potatoes." Approved by the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

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Believe it or not, our ancestors refused to eat what is now the most popular vegetable in America -- the white potato. As late as the year 1740 some people in North America refused to work where they had to eat potatoes. In 1792 -- less than a hundred and fifty years ago, somebody printed this statement:

"As to potatoes, it would be idle to consider them in the same view as an article of human food, which ninety-nine-hundredths of the human species will not touch."

But as soon as "the human species" saw the error of its ways, it went after potatoes in a big way. Now potatoes are produced in every one of the forty-eight States, and even if the crop should fail completely, in the drought States, we still would have a somewhat greater supply than last year.

I've been talking to a potato man recently, and from him I learned some mighty interesting facts for homemakers. For instance, I learned that the price of potatoes is comparatively low just now. Of course, nobody knows what the price will be by fall. That depends on the size of the late crop, which is at the mercy of the weather. But potatoes are never excessively high, considering their food value. In the suggestions for low-cost meals, issued by the Bureau of Home Economics, potatoes are recommended for use every day in the year. They offer substantial food value for the money, and that's what interests consumers, especially those with reduced incomes.

Do you know when "new" potatoes come on the market nowadays? As early as December, we get potatoes from Bermuda and southern Florida. In March, the crop from Texas and northern Florida begins to come in, and other States follow, as the season progresses. "Late" potatoes, the main crop, come on the market in the early fall. We raise about four times as many "late" as "early" potatoes.

Those of you who like statistics -- nice fat ones dealing in millions -- will be interested in the crop estimate for 1934. It's 348 million bushels, which would be an average crop. Last year's potato crop was 317 million bushels.

Recently there has been a surplus of early potatoes in three States -- Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. The Federal Surplus Relief Corporation agreed to buy up two thousand carloads of this surplus crop for needy families of the unemployed. Two thousand carloads seems like a lot of potatoes, until you remember that ordinarily we raise a total of not less than two hundred thousand carloads.



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Do you know what kind of potatoes to look for, when you do your vegetable shopping? The best potatoes are hard, smooth, bright, and of good shape. If you buy potatoes without looking them over first, you may find them spongy, or slightly soft, or scabby, or covered with cuts and bruises. Bad bargains, because they won't keep well, and they won't peel economically either.

One defect to watch for is sunburn, which you can recognize by a greenish color -- or by the bitter flavor, if you're so unfortunate as to eat a sunburned potato. Incidentally, sunburn can develop after potatoes are bought, if you leave them uncovered and exposed to strong light. Always keep potatoes in a dark place.

Potatoes have two defects besides sunburn, which are pretty hard to discover unless you are an expert. If we could look through potatoes, as an egg candler looks through eggs, we could tell whether the nice-looking tubers we are about to buy have hollow hearts, or black hearts. Of course, if we could cut into one or two of them -- but grocers wouldn't care to have us whittling up their potatoes.

Some time ago, plant explorers of the U. S. Department of Agriculture discovered a new variety of potato, down in South America. It was a yellow-fleshed, but not a sweet potato. Except for the yellow color, it looked and tasted like our staple Irish or white potato. The nutrition experts were much interested in this new vegetable, because they thought the yellow color indicated the presence of vitamin A. Well, they found out that the yellow "white potato" did contain vitamin A. So it would make a valuable contribution to the low-cost diet. That was good news.

The next thing to find out was whether the South American potato would grow well in North America. The plant breeders crossed the new potato with American varieties, and they're still working to create a potato that will be as popular as our ordinary types, and still keep that precious vitamin A of the yellow potato. The results so far are highly promising.

The native home of the white potato plant is not Ireland, but South America. It was brought to the United States from Ireland, however, in the year 1719. In those days, as I said before, nobody cared much for potatoes. During the reign of King Louis XVI, they were called "cattle feed."

Something had to be done about it, so a famous Frenchman, Parmentier, gave a reception, and served potatoes at every course. He carried a bouquet of potato blossoms to Versailles, and presented them to King Louis and Marie Antoinette. The King put a potato blossom in the lapel of his coat. The Queen wore potato blossoms in her hair. Then all Paris got excited about this vegetable, for naturally all the ladies, (and probably all the men, too) wanted to follow the style set by the King and Queen.

It's hard to believe, now, that the Grand Old Potato had such a struggle, getting established.



